CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING CCL CCA CONSEIL CANADIEN SUR L'APPRENTISSAGE

LESSONS IN LEARNING

The effectiveness of work-experience programs in Canadian high schools

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Work-experience programs, which are commonplace in most Canadian high schools, are designed to enhance learning for students while providing them with the opportunity to explore their career options.

Current research on the effectiveness of such programs suggests that they have a number of important benefits, from improved self-esteem to increased motivation, but there is little evidence that they contribute to improved academic achievement.

Taking learning outside the classroom

Work-experience programs take place in the community—generally in a workplace setting—and provide students with an opportunity to enhance their school programs with work-related learning. Such programs are also known as "school-to-work transition programs" because they link schooling with the workplace.

These programs take many different forms:

- **Work Experience:** a planned learning opportunity that provides students with brief periods of work experience, usually lasting between one week and four weeks.
- **Virtual Work Experience:** these programs allow students to explore workplaces, jobs and work tasks via computer simulated workplaces. By using virtual tours, young people have an opportunity to develop an understanding of what would be expected of them during an actual work experience.
- **Job Shadowing:** a work-experience option where students learn about a particular job by shadowing (i.e., observing) a competent worker throughout their work day. Job shadowing provides temporary unpaid exposure to the workplace in an occupational area of interest to the student.
- **Co-operative Education:** these programs combine course work with a work placement. Students are expected to apply and extend their knowledge in the workplace and to demonstrate the achievement of placement expectations that reflect current workplace practices and standards.
- **Job Twinning:** this type of work-experience program provides the student with an opportunity to accompany a co-op education student to his or her placement.
- **Apprenticeships:** these programs are paid, work-based training combined with post-secondary education. Apprentices spend approximately 80% of their time on the job learning skills under the direction of a highly skilled journeyman, with the balance of their time spent learning in a classroom setting. Apprenticeships can last anywhere from three to five years.

Work-experience programs in Canada

High schools across Canada offer a wide variety of work-experience programs for students. For example, in Ontario, students can enrol in the Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program which allows them to concentrate on a specific area (such as construction, business, health and wellness or horticulture and landscaping) and learn in a real work environment as well as in school.

Ontario high-school students can also sign up for apprenticeships through the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), a province-wide initiative available to students who are 16-years-old or older and in Grade 11 or Grade 12. OYAP offers qualified students a choice of 135 trades to apprentice in.

Co-operative education programs in Ontario are available through the Ontario Public Service Learn and Work program, the Ontario Ranger program, Summer Experience programs, and Partners in Experiential Learning's academic co-op programs.

In British Columbia, the high-school curriculum incorporates work-experience opportunities in which students learn about, observe and participate in tasks and responsibilities related to a specific occupation or career. Work experience takes place in the community where students apply classroom learning in a non-school context and gain new skills applicable in future job settings.

The Ace IT Youth Program is a popular industry training program for high-school students in B.C. The program allows students a balance of course work and work training, combined with an apprenticeship program that enables students to complete the equivalent of one year of post-secondary education while still in high school.

In Manitoba, the Senior Years Apprenticeship Program (SYAO) allows high-school students in Grade 10, 11 or 12 to start apprenticeship training in one of 50 trades. The SYAO combines traditional classroom instruction with part-time, paid, on-the-job training.

In Saskatchewan high-school students can earn up to four credits in Career and Work Exploration where they participate in work placements in the community to explore career options. The Saskatchewan Youth Apprenticeship (SYA) program supports awareness of apprenticeships and skilled-trades careers. Participation in SYA allows high-school students to earn trade-time credit and waiver of registration fees for apprentices. Saskatchewan also offers up to four Apprenticeship Credits for high-school students employed in any trade in the province. The credits, two in each of grade 11 and 12, require a learning plan developed by the student and school and can be used as electives toward graduation requirements.

In Alberta, Work Experience courses allow students to explore their career options and develop skills in one or more areas of work. The Career and Technology Studies program introduces students to a range of career options in technical and trade areas and allows them to gain work experience. In the Registered Apprenticeship Program, students begin apprenticing for a trade while still in high school, spending a portion of their school time in the work place as registered apprentices in a designated trade.

The New Brunswick Youth Career Connections Program provides approved high-school students with practical, paid summer job experience and a guaranteed spot in a related course at New Brunswick Community College (or "preferred status" at the University of New Brunswick, the Université de Moncton or Atlantic Baptist University).

Nova Scotia's Options and Opportunities, or "O2", is a new program set up by the Ministry of Education that offers students hands-on learning experiences in a number of sectors including trades and technologies, business education, health services, information technology, hospitality and tourism. The program is currently available in 27 schools across the province.

Research on the outcomes of work experience programs

Across Canada, students, schools, businesses and other partners are putting substantial efforts into work-experience programs. Underlying these efforts is the assumption that work-experience programs carry benefits such as increased engagement in work and learning, improvements in academic achievement and high school graduation rates, and smoother transitions from high school into the labour force or post-secondary studies.

In 2009, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) with support from the Ontario Ministry of Education, undertook an examination of these assumptions. The resulting report, *The Impact of Experiential Learning Programs on Student Success*, sought an answer to the question "What do we know about the impact of work experience programs on student achievement, high-school graduation and preparation for post-secondary pathways?"

The report reviewed 35 international studies that looked into the effectiveness of high-school work-experience programs. CCL researchers found that evidence of the impact of work-experience programs on academic achievement (i.e, changes in grades, grade-point average, and standardized scores) was inconclusive. Four studies (two of which were evaluated as being of low-quality) reported positive outcomes. That is, the results suggested that participating in work-experience programs leads to increased academic achievement. Four other studies (of medium to high quality) reported that work-experience programs have no impact on academic success.

More positive results were found regarding the impact of such programs on high-school graduation rates and career preparation; work-experience programs have a positive impact on graduation rates. Further, students who experience any type of work-experience program also show improvements in self-esteem,[1] engagement in the workplace and in school,[2,3,4] leadership,[5,6] and motivation.[7,8]

Lessons in Learning: developing effective work experience programs

Work-experience programs can enhance high-school students' classroom learning experiences. The research on such programs has identified a number of lessons for making them as effective as possible.

1. Care needs to be taken when matching students to placements

Learning through work experience is purposeful in that it is meant to raise the interest of young people and maintain and encourage further engagement in the community and in the workforce. Inappropriate placements, or placement for placement's sake, may, in fact, hinder this goal. When students are not interested in the career path associated with a particular placement, they may become disengaged. As a result, employers feel they are wasting scarce resources, and both student and employer become disenchanted by the experience.

2. Assign a dedicated coordinator to oversee the program to ensure its success

Communication and involvement in the curriculum are an important component of work experience programs for employers. The creation of specific Program Co-ordinator positions allows ongoing and strong relationships to be built with employers in the community. Program Co-ordinators can deliver employer orientations and information sessions explaining the role of the employer, the structure, curriculum design, and goals of the program. They can work with employers to ensure the on-site learning experience is structured and systematically builds on both curricular content and prior experiences. The experiences need to be positive for both the students and the employers.

3. Develop a 'contract' between the employer and the student that sets out reasonable expectations for each party

Because some employers see work experience programs primarily in terms of the contribution that the students make to the business in which they are engaged—rather than as a learning opportunity for the student—a successful work experience placement must achieve a balance between these objectives. Disappointment on the part of both employers and students can be avoided if both parties are oriented to the expectations that each holds. A 'contract' lets all the parties know what is expected of them.

4. Prepare students in advance

Although part of the intent of work experience programs is to expose students to career and life experiences not necessarily found in the school setting, students are expected to bring certain skill sets and behaviours to the experiential setting. Students must bring with them a level of preparation that is congruent with the setting in which they will be a part and the expectations of the employer. Well-prepared students will feel more comfortable and confident, as will the employers.

Conclusion

Though their effect on academic achievement may be unclear, high-school work-experience programs seem to have a positive impact on high-school graduation rates and student engagement in school and employment. These programs also seem to hold promise for student improvement in other areas including motivation, self-esteem, leadership ability, graduation rates and student retention. In doing so, work-experience programs augment the efforts that Canada's provinces and territories are making to improve high-school success for all students.

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